

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

BY

HENRY CLOSE MONTGOMERY, JR.

A.B., Hanover College, 1921

A.M., University of Illinois, 1926

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
CLASSICS IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1945

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Thomas Jefferson's formal education, not unlike that of most of his contemporaries, was one in which studies in the ancient languages, literatures, and history were predominant. Even in his preparation for law he had in his teacher, George Wythe, a man of classical tastes and interests. Jefferson himself never lost touch with the classical authors and continued his self-education in them until the last days of his life. The mind and spirit of classical antiquity were not so much an influence on Jefferson's own life and way of life as rather a fusion with his personality and manifested in almost every occupation and activity of his career.

Jefferson's oneness with Greek and Roman antiquity is demonstrated in a number of fields within the inclusive concept of classical philology. In his appreciation of the literary qualities of ancient writers he exhibited sound discrimination. As a young man Jefferson enjoyed the authors of greater imaginative appeal. In his maturity the historians and ethical philosophers were his favorites, while in his last years the Greek tragic poets along with the Bible were his only literary interests.

As a lawyer Jefferson knew, and valued, the system of Roman civil law. He used Roman law in problems of national and international law. He considered Roman law the most conformable with the principles of justice ever established among men and he was more familiar with the influence of Roman law on English common law than any man of his time. In architecture Jefferson was responsible for the wide spread of the classical revival style that dominated American architecture for the first half of the nineteenth century. In domestic and collegiate as well as in civic architecture his ideas and practices were revolutionary but dictated by sound fundamental principles of classical art.

Jefferson's political theories were not strongly influenced by the French school that inspired so many of his contemporaries.

He was familiar with the system of checks and balances and in full agreement with it. His own temperament, however, inclined him toward an emphasis on the morality of politics rather than with the problems of application. His faith in the will of great masses of people and his insistence on a government based on law point to a closer kinship with Aristotle than with any other ancient theorist. Jefferson's familiarity with ancient history permitted him to cite examples in this history in interpreting the events of his own times and in charting programs for the future. His personal philosophy was, in his own statement, Epicurean. This is true only in part. Jefferson knew the ancient philosophies well and lived as much, or more, in accordance with Stoic principles as with Epicurean. His sociological principles, in particular, were those of Stoicism and his Epicureanism consisted principally of a mild form of hedonism in combination with a contempt for mysticism.

Although interested more in the transmission of ideas than in linguistics Thomas Jefferson was too well grounded in a number of languages to neglect language, and comparative language, entirely. He recognized, and approved, neologisms in the ancient and modern languages. He was a logician rather than a formalist in grammar. He had an intimate understanding of the laws of prosody and accent. It was one of his especial hopes that the modern Greeks might adopt the pronunciation of the Greek of antiquity. His studies in comparative philology were centered on the Indian dialects of North America, but the methods he employed were those of other philologists whose procedure he anticipated by a generation.

Since Jefferson's own education and life were eminently in the classical tradition it is not surprising that his educational theories were similarly directed. He was progressive. His viewpoint was utilitarian but classical history, language, or literature were included in all his curricula from the elementary schools through the university. In the formulation of papers on education, in personal instructions to young students, and in his own University of Virginia the classical elements in education were always emphasized.

The information on Jefferson's knowledge and confidence in the ancient classics is primarily derived from his own writings. A number of biographies are also useful, particularly those earlier ones whose authors had the benefit of deriving information from Jefferson's own descendants. Jeffersonian Americanism is the product of a man thoroughly confident in the truly liberalizing effects of a knowledge of classical culture. To understand and perpetuate the principles and ideals of Thomas Jefferson it is necessary to study and understand the culture of those ancient nations whose contributions in their totality were harmonized with the personality of Jefferson himself.

VITA

Henry Close Montgomery, Jr., was born August 1, 1901, in Seymour, Indiana. He attended the public schools of Seymour and Hanover, Indiana, graduating from the Hanover Academy in 1917. In 1921 he received the A.B. degree from Hanover College. He has studied at Columbia University, the University of Rome, the University of Illinois, the University of Heidelberg, the University of Vienna, and the University of Colorado. He received the degree of Master of Arts in Classics from the University of Illinois in 1926. From 1921 to 1924 he was Director of Athletics and teacher of Latin and French in the Divernon, Illinois, Township High School. From 1924 to 1926 he was an Assistant in the Department of Classics at the University of Illinois. From 1926 to 1940 he was first Assistant Professor, then Associate Professor of Latin and Greek in Wabash College. Since 1940 he has been Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Classics at Miami University. In 1944 he was appointed Chairman of the Committee on Graduate Study at Miami University. He is a member of the American Philological Association, of the Archaeological Institute of America, of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, the American Classical League, the Ohio Classical Conference, the Oxford (Ohio) Archaeological Society, Eta Sigma Phi, Phi Kappa Epsilon, Phi Eta, and is listed in *Who Is Who in Music*. He is Chairman for the State of Ohio for the Committee on the Present Status of Classical Education, Vice-President for Ohio for the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Representative of this same organization to the Council of the American Classical League 1945 to 1948, former First Vice-President of the Ohio Classical Conference, member of the Committee of Judges for the Ohio Latin Contests since 1941, Chairman of the same Committee in 1945, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Oxford Archaeological Society. His publications, exclusive of non-professional book reviews and articles, are as follows:

(Abbreviations: *AJP* = American Journal of Philology; *CB* = Classical Bulletin; *CJ* = Classical Journal; *CO* = Classical Outlook; *CP* = Classical Philology; *CW* = Classical Weekly.)

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- Letter: Is Latin No Aid to English? *Modern Language Journal*, XVI, March, 1932, 515-6.
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- Note: Julius Caesar and the Sectio Caesarea, *CW*, XXVII, 1935, 88.
- Note: Tacitus on Changes of Style in Public Speaking, *CW*, XXVII, 1935, 112.
- Note: Washington the Stoic, *CJ*, XXXI, 1936, 371-73.
- Article: The Controversy About the Origin of the Olympic Games, *CW*, XXIX, 1936, 169-74.
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- Article: Matthew Arnold, Classicist, *CJ*, XXXIV, 1939, 532-37.
- Article: Dr. Baldwin's Grave (Restoration and translation of the Latin Inscription), *Wabash College Bulletin*, XXXIX, 1940, 21.
- Note: Propaganda from the Air in Antiquity, *CJ*, XXXVI, 1940, 170.
- Note: A Supplement to "Herodotus Confirmed Once Again," *CJ*, XXXVI, 1941, 424.
- Note: A Postscript to Air Propaganda, *CJ*, XXXVI, 1941, 425.
- Article: Demosthenes and the World Today, *CO*, XIX, 1941, 20-1.
- Article: A Renaissance of the Classics, *CB*, XVIII, 1942, 49-51. (With R. E. Hohmann).

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Note: Remarks on "Adaptative Translations of the Classics," *CJ*, XXXIX, 1943, 25-8.

Article: A Glossary of Railroad Terms, *American Speech*, XVIII, 1943, 161-70. (With W. F. Cottrell).

Article: Thomas Jefferson, Critic of the Classics, *Quarterly Rev. of Literature*, I, Autumn 1943, 54-8.

Note: The Homeric Epithet in Contemporary Literature, *CJ*, XXXIX, 1944, 229-31. (With N. Ink).

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Article: The Humanistic Role of the Ancient Classics, *The Educational Record*, April (Spring), 1944, 109-17.

Article: Thomas Jefferson as a Philologist (II), *AJP*, LXV, October, 1944, 367-71.

